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Towards a 'virtual' world: Social isolation and struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic as single women living alone

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This article is a personal reflection of how the current COVID-19 pandemic affects our working lives and wellbeing, as single female academics who live alone in the UK. We offer a dialogue of our daily lives of being confined at home with lockdown measures extended. In particular, we focus on the experience of, and coping with, isolation and loneliness. Is isolation making us more socially connected? Through 'virtual' working and changing learning environments for us as teachers and learners, we explore changes in our working life and subsequent changes in the domestic environment. By capturing our lived experiences, we create an intellectual and safe space to voice our emotional struggles — as 'invisible' isolated individuals containing and consuming loneliness on our own. We foster alternative conversations as to how we might engender new perspectives from single female academics to combat social isolation in the workplace.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19 pandemic, loneliness, single women, social isolation, virtual work

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1 | BEGINNING

As we sit at our dining tables pondering how we should construct an article to reflect on our lived experiences after the country-wide lockdown in the UK beginning on 23 March, and its consequences on our working-life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic, we realized that we are alone. With the doors closed, we are protected against possible infections and reminded of the UK government advice on social distancing — in an attempt to slow the transmission of the disease in the community, and protect ourselves and others from this illness. Consequently, our mobility of free movement and human contact are severely restricted. This causes us to reflect on the negative impact of these measures on our physical and psychological wellbeing as single women and early career researchers, who live alone. Isolation changes the way we work and connect with others, requiring us to dedicate ourselves socially to the same screens that host our daily work meetings, teaching and research activities; it aggravates loneliness and causes us to become increasingly worried about our psychological as well as our physical wellbeing. In this article we reflect on the wider meaning of our personal experiences beyond the dining room of our homes.

This personal reflection is provoked by the contestation of ideologies about 'adaptive' and 'unproblematic' women and the visible resurgence of feminist organizational scholarship (e.g., Bell, Meriläinen, Taylor, & Tienari, 2020; Gill, Kelan, & Scharff, 2017; Lewis & Simpson, 2017; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018), which is crucial in understanding the experiences of working life. Bell, Meriläinen, Taylor, and Tienari (2018) argue that narratives of feminism are often 'whitewashed' in ways which simplify tensions and overlook multiple voices across space and time. Beyond conventional linear chronological narratives, Raewyn Connell's keynote speech at the GWO Sydney conference reminded us that:

the new generation of scholars [needs] to be bold. Don't get stuck in familiar models of gender, not even mine. Share your ideas and findings, and work cooperatively. Feminist movements have flourished the more they have worked as collectives, however informal or imperfect. (Pullen, Lewis, & Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019, p. 6)

In other words, feminist frontiers mark a shift away from a focus on equality to a focus on fostering alternative dialogues that celebrate differences and collective resistance, and address the demands of marginalized, diasporic cultures across national and other borders. We are inspired by these feminisms that seek to give voice to the overlooked in different places and spaces, at different times. We use this to outline the contours of our distinctive sensibilities, stemming from feminism values and practices, and to focus on opening up repressed thoughts, voices and vulnerabilities about the patterned nature of lockdown life. We reflect on our work experiences and personal stories during the COVID-19 pandemic that we are currently living through — as early career researchers, as teachers and learners, as readers and writers, and most importantly here, as single women living alone. Through this we seek to explore the role of complex feelings and emotions on our thinking, learning and being.

Feminist and civil rights activist Audre Lorde (2007) once observed that, 'there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives' (p. 138). Feminist frontiers critiques allow us to address what is typically left unsaid when writers learn to assume the normalcy of masculine notions of 'rigor', 'hardness' and 'penetrating conclusiveness' (Phillips, Pullen, & Rhodes, 2014, p. 316) through adherence to a 'logic of trajectory, strategy and purpose' (Höpfl, 2011, p. 32). This starts to render gendered writing open for discussion. It turns attention to enabling multitudes of affectual voices and texts by creating intellectual spaces to capture and convey different forms of expression (Pullen & Rhodes, 2015). Yet male voices are dominating current 'scientific and strategic' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the responses of many institutions to the pandemic are increasingly constructed by masculinist politics.

Contemporary feminist theory offers potential change (e.g., intersectional issues) regarding gendered norms that directly influence how we think and what we write in the field of Organization Studies and beyond (e.g., Strauß & Boncori, 2020; Wieners & Weber, 2020). Yet, dominant patriarchal discourses have a direct influence on passive

coping styles across institutions. Thus, this piece of writing is a form of personal resistance against normalized practices in scholarly communities. It uses feminism as a lens to explore and rethink the multiplicity of lives and livelihoods of single women who live alone. It recognizes and draws attention to the suppressed thoughts, voices and realities of single women who live alone during the lockdown. We call for further exploration on this topic as a reminder of reaching this group of people, who maybe are struggling with social isolation and intensified workloads but are often overlooked in the neoliberal academia.

2 | THE NEVER-ENDING SHIFT TOWARDS A 'VIRTUAL WORKSPACE'

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, as technology enabled more virtual working, more people have been working outside the traditional workspace. According to the Office of National Statistics Labour Force Survey, there were more than 1.5 million people working remotely for their main jobs in the UK in 2019. Many organizations claim to have shifted towards virtual working to cut operational costs and attract and retain top personnel (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). In other words, virtual working is presented as a by-product of information communication technologies and a way of solving business problems. Consequently, there has been an increased interest among organizational scholarship on the impact of virtual working in the past two decades (Collins, Hislop, & Cartwright, 2016; Garrett, Spreitzer, & Bacevice, 2017; Wang, Albert, & Sun, 2020). Unlike virtual workers who still have access to traditional workspaces, where 'most employees work in office, but ... have the option of working virtually at least part-time' (Bartel, Wrzesniewski, & Wiesenfeld, 2012, p. 744), since the lockdown, the universities where we work have been closed completely with no access to offices or other physical facilities. All work including teaching and administrative tasks has been moved online. We no longer have access to our workplace.

One week before the announcement of lockdown, university teaching has been switched online. The Information Communication Technology team worked around the clock to get software and equipment ready for online teaching and communication. Many of us were getting used to work from home. I spent the weekend turning my living room into a video/audio-friendly virtual working space, and minimising background distractions, such as messy piled up clothes on the sofa. Once I cleaned up and organised fairly acceptable to face the webcam, I started to join webinars dedicated to training us on-screen recording software and other virtual tools for continued work. I stay connected with my line manager, team members and colleagues using technology. I reminded myself to take frequent breaks and try to structure my day as much as possible in order to find a new 'normal'.

The preparations for working in a virtual environment on a full-time basis were intensive and relied centrally on technology to enable online social interactions. This was presented as a way of developing our professional skills that could benefit us in the long run.

Since the lockdown, I no longer have access to spontaneous conversations and interactions with colleagues whom I share an office with. I won't be able to chat with other colleagues in the kitchen or corridor where we usually share thoughts and practices on teaching and research.

As early career researchers, we acknowledged the challenges for our professional development as a result of the lockdown. We have reflected the importance of the taken-for-granted human contact which is vital for our thinking and being. We are aware that as virtual workers we will miss out on informal learning of work-related skills through spontaneous conversation with colleagues (Cooper & Kurland, 2002).

In addition, we also recognized our behaviour changes in the domestic environment.

Nowadays I have to spend more time cleaning up my messy apartment and cooking for both weekdays and weekends. Prior to the pandemic, I never cooked as I live alone. I usually ordered food from restaurants or picked-up something to eat when I headed back home from the office. I also have cleaners do house-keeping, but now, it is unavailable under lockdown. Despite seeming just routine stuff, it takes more time for me to finish these normal tasks now.

To keep a normal work routine and a balanced work and home life, in the first week of the lockdown, I woke up around the same time. I dressed up and wore makeup, as I would if I was going to work. I started my workday at the same time as I would in my office. A few weeks down the road, I realised that I spend more time in pyjamas and nightgowns than clothes.

These short stories trace the subtle behavioural changes that we have experienced as a consequence of the blurring of boundaries between work and home (Daniel, Domenico, & Nunan, 2018).

3 | ISOLATION AND LONELINESS: PHYSICALLY DETACHING FROM OUR WORKPLACES AND ORGANIZATIONS

Being academics, we are used to working flexibly to juggle our teaching, researching, writing and administrative responsibilities. But as time passes, we both experience a flood of feelings of social and emotional isolation as the lockdown extends and we immerse ourselves in our virtual workspaces. As single women isolated at home, we are alone. Yet we are social beings and feel the need to interact physically with others, to connect, relate and feel others' feelings.

I am an introvert and used to work from home. Normally, I would spend at least one day a week working remotely from home on my research projects. Initially, the lifestyle shift after lockdown did not seem that different from my usual daily working routine. But now I am unable to get those small doses of face-to-face interaction with my colleagues, to have scheduled dinners with friends, or to enjoy the warmth of a big hug as I usually greet others. I realise that it's not just my ability to reason that has been negatively affected, as my thinking is often blocked, but the importance of human contact that makes me feel truly connected to the workplace and social networks.

We reflect on the effects of social isolation over time. Spending almost all of our time alone aggravates feelings of disconnectedness and loneliness, particularly for single female academics like us who live alone with no close family nearby. Isolation and loneliness have not been widely researched in the organizational contexts, even though these are one of the main challenges faced by virtual workers (Bartel et al., 2012). Reflecting upon our experiences of extreme isolation without a provisional end date pushes us to rethink the very importance of having a family of our own:

Am I regretting being single? This is a question that I thought I would never ask myself. Questions like what if I started a family or at least have a partner, would that make any difference? Before the lockdown, I thought being alone is something I am quite comfortable with. However, choosing solitude is completely different from being forced into it. There was an option for me to socialise with others outside of my home prior to the pandemic, whereas now, being alone is my only option.

I compare myself with people who had a family, a partner, kids around them. Of course, they have their own issues to solve. But for me, being able to hug someone — as Boncori (2020) describes when she holds her baby as emotional security — is impossible for a single woman like me. I am alone and I am lonely.

Coping with isolation and loneliness during lockdown and social distancing as single women who live alone takes a lot of energy. Unlike women with partners, children or other family members living together in a household, we have no physical contact with anyone, even a cuddle with our loved ones. We must shoulder the financial burden on our own, so sometimes we worry about the future, about how life will be after the pandemic ends and wonder if there will still be a real life outside of our homes. Our reflection is not to undermine the difficulties and the potential impacts on their physical and mental wellbeing among those with family responsibilities, but to recognize the challenges and struggles that we face as single women who live alone, a group of individuals who rarely received attention in the scholarly community.

Loneliness is associated with feelings of lack of intimacy and emotional closeness, feelings of unloved, unaccepted and the experience of being misunderstood (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2014).

We are in the fourth week of the lockdown. I miss human contact, even just talking to someone on the street or someone in a supermarket. The weather these days is nice and sunny. I often hear kids playing in the garden next to my apartment. However, the increased number of confirmed cases and death toll means I have to suppress my desire to be social. The only time I go out is for my once a week grocery shopping. I only go out in the early morning to avoid social contact with others. I start to realise that I am afraid of going out.

Social distancing is challenging for many. But for single women who live alone it is a particular struggle, as they are isolated from family and community. One of us has expressed her mixed emotions in recent weeks, wrapped up with trying to stay calm and exercise self-care. While she struggles with feelings of anxiety and loneliness, she feels compelled to reassure her close friends and family who show concern yet live far away.

Tracing back to early March, I was walking along Oxford Street in central London. It was business as usual in the boutiques and department stores. I received a voice message from my mother who lives in China, which was under provisional lockdown. She spoke with concern: 'Do you have enough food in the apartment? You need to get some fresh food, things like milk, eggs, drinking water and frozen food as well as other necessities in case of lockdown measures being introduced with immediate effect like we have experienced.' Yet the eggs, pasta, and toilet rolls shelves are empty in the supermarket. Soon after, it is announced on the news that members of the public are stockpiling food, medicine and other items. Fear is reshaping and reconstructing behaviour.

In light of the lengthy period of social isolation, understanding and exploring natural human desire to disengage the self from the collective society is more important than ever before. Loneliness can be destructive or restorative when there is a choice of solitude.

4 | SILENCE OF LIVING ALONE IN A CITY GONE QUIET AND SILENCING

Living alone releases us from gendered caring, parenting and home-schooling responsibilities. But solitude has always had an ambivalent status. David Vincent once argued that the ambivalent nature of solitude has become a prominent concern in the modern era. For us, as academics who hold feminist values, we are proud to speak as single women who live alone. We seek to alleviate loneliness and social isolation. Yet under the current COVID-19 pandemic, solitude has taken on a new meaning.

The world has suddenly gone quiet and all my human contacts are online now. I live alone, seeking comfort in silence of solitude, but the silence is challenging. I used to enjoy being in control of my domain and my time, but this unprecedented level of isolation has called this into question.

While the search and desire for solitude is seen as a symptom of modern life that is socially bearable, under the current pandemic, the enforced isolation of living alone is beyond our capacity. Prolonged silence permeates the air, in the absence of others to communicate with and in pauses during virtual conversations. We have had to accept the silence, broken only by voices in the virtual world, which forces us to think carefully about whether and how to break the silence and fill the blank space of isolation.

The quiet I thought I would adapt to. But I can't stand it. As the situation deteriorates, feelings of insecurity, fear and frustration are flooding through the community. A feeling of melancholy runs through my body. To protect myself, I have had to limit my exposure in the public domain. I stay alone in my apartment and I turn on the TV or music as long as I am awake. What comes out is the notion of drowning into the silence, being silenced by my reliance on expected engagement like face-to-face interactions, and being silenced by the aggravated loneliness under remote work.

In silence, it seems that our sensibilities and vulnerabilities are emerging, as we both reflect on our increased and changing media consumption. We find it becomes difficult to breathe day after day under lockdown. The content we choose to consume affects our feelings and psychological wellbeing.

With limited access to other people, I started to follow news more closely. The first thing I do when I open my eyes in the morning is reaching my phone and opening BBC news. This is one of my ways to interact with the world outside.

I have begun spending more time on following broadcasting news and updates on social media, but I have had to block my exposure to negativity and practice silence on social networks, as online abuse has increased since the coronavirus outbreak began. Chinese and people of other Asian origins have been particularly targeted. Toxic posts and comments on social media sites like Twitter and hashtag connecting China to coronavirus use terms like the 'Chinese virus' to accuse and blame us for carrying and spreading the virus. Racism connected to coronavirus has led to assaults in the UK, other European countries and the United States.

Appadurai (1996) claims that 'where there is [media] consumption there is pleasure, and where there is pleasure there is agency' which 'when collective can become the fuel for action' (p. 7). In the diasporic context, media could explain the generation of collective scattered imaginations, highlighting the shared aspects of individual identities regarding common culture, geography and history, binding us as being socially belonging to a particular social group and community. In other words, both authors have followed social media and news as ways to fill the paused moments created by silence. But can we assume such behavioural change in media consumption is connected to the shaping and reshaping of individual identities, community belongings and further resistance?

I ask myself, 'why do I stay silent towards cyberbullying and attacks against Asians, as if it does not exist? Is it because of personal insecurity and/or the potential risks of voicing my thoughts? Is it because I am a single woman with a minority ethnicity in a country where I am labelled as different or "other"? Yes.' I always try to keep my head down, especially now. I am trying to protect myself from being targeted, physically and psychologically.

Media reporting of racist attacks on Asians, women in particular, has increased significantly, as have accounts of the fume that inevitably attends these victims raising their voices. It is reported in recent news that a Chinese cyclist was in an attack cycling in Nottinghamshire, when a car slowed down next to her, throwing beer at her and laughed inside (BBC, 2020a, April 24). Another group of four Chinese students, aged in their twenties, were wearing face

masks when they were attacked in Southampton (BBC, 2020b, March 22). A further aspect of the exposure to negativity involves us being devastated by the racially aggravated hate crimes connecting to coronavirus. The weakness and fear of violence further constrains us to keep our heads down when we go out and stay silent, assuming we live as usual and carry on our daily working life.

But this has to stop. We are sometimes accustomed to the privilege of being able to write about the oppressed voices of those who are marginalized. What we rarely discuss is whether we choose or are compelled to keep silent. One of the authors reflected on her latest participation in GWO writing workshop experiences in Helsinki when they discussed and dug deeper into the notion of silence related to multiple identities and pressures as foreign female academics in a male-dominated culture. While silence is regarded as the expression of knowing and the inaudible manifestation of frailty of words, the power of silence in language arises from dispelling one's inside darkness, anxiety and void (Ahonen et al., 2020).

I ask myself, 'what are my identity/ies? How do my emotions influence my way of living as a single woman? How does this influence the content and way in which I teach as a response to the pandemic?'

Recognition of moments of silence is important when we move our face-to-face teaching activities to online delivery. We want to embrace the embodied and emotional experiences in these moments of silence, hidden behind screens. We want to engage, relate and resonate with our students in this unfamiliar teaching and learning environment by highlighting the unspoken thoughts and responses interwoven in silence. Yet, the reality is disappointing. Students are not engaging in online delivery in large numbers and the limited capacity of the Internet at home as well as the university's online systems means that conversations with students go very slowly.

I had a session where some students did not have a stable Internet connection and a working microphone/audio. We had to revert to written discussion which takes longer even if you type very fast. I figured that the silence can be disconcerting when you can't see them. It seems we need to get used to giving students the space to think and write a response to a question. In another session, only two students attended. Three others logged on, but left immediately. I don't know why this happened, perhaps because they were shy or did not have their audio switched on. I can use the share content tool to upload and present PowerPoint slides and share a Chrome tab to play a video. Neither of the students had looked at the preparatory materials beforehand. In the end, we discussed their assignment.

Silence not only appears between academics and students but also among academics themselves in an informal setting.

As a way to keep in touch during the pandemic, monthly coffee meetings in the business school have switched to daily virtual coffee meetings, a virtual place where staff get together. I noticed that unlike other virtual meetings with specific agenda, the virtual coffee meetings have many silent gaps. A sense of awkwardness infuses the virtual environment. I wonder if this is because people are trying to avoid talking over each other or are they uncomfortable with expressing their opinions in these supposedly casual conversations? I keep silent and watch people leave during these silent moments.

We recognize the absence of words, even during informal conversations, as a silencing. We identify the reasons for being silent — as related to being labelled as different from others, allowing overwhelming feelings of insecurity to rise up. Fear of being interpreted as inappropriate, fear of being harshly criticized or offended drags us into silence. But it does not mean we stop thinking or being noisy in our heads.

In this reflection, we have touched on neglected voices and things that have been left unsaid; we have interpreted feminism in pandemic times as a distinctive sensibility that focuses on speaking up and voicing suppressed

but vivid emotions; we have perceived feminism as beyond any single woman's choices and ideas of empowerment. In this way, we have tried to open up a way of articulating the lived experience of two single women, early career academics who live alone in this pandemic.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors have nothing to disclose and no conflicts of interest.

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